

**WTE column, December 31, 2015. Editor's headline: "A tale of police brutality"
Casper Star Tribune of January 3, 2016: "Anguish has not come to an end"**

These past weeks I have been engaged in a journey that I urge you, dear readers, to follow. It's accomplished by means of a book that takes us into the body of a black man, takes us into the mind that seeks safety for said body and—more importantly and more desperately—for the safety of his only child, his teenaged son Samori.

The journey comes via the self-disclosures of Ta-Nehisi Coates, national correspondent for The Atlantic and author of a previous memoir. To say that his writing is intelligent is an understatement. This writer continues the tradition of Viktor Frankl's "From Deathcamp to Existentialism."

"Between the World and Me" is a book-length letter to Samori, divided into chapters, in which the writer seeks to explain to (and shield his son from) the acts of violence and injustice directed against his people, even while acknowledging a father's powerlessness to do so. For those of us who tend to ignore or downplay these facts, this slim volume is must-read—even though, as the author says, "There is no uplifting way to say this."

The need to be on guard, always on guard, is what makes the speaker, like everyone he remembers from childhood, "powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid."

In South Baltimore, where he grew up, "My life was the immediate negotiation of violence, within my house and without," the author reports. He recalls beatings with belts and electric chords that "every father I knew"—mothers, too—rained down on their children. There, too, are the "prohibited blocks" where neighborhood "crews" must be dodged, lest they "break your jaw, stomp your face." He learned their laws before learning his "colors and shapes." They imbue him with anger, pain, and revulsion.

"Shortly before you were born, I was pulled over by the PG (Prince George) County police," begins the second section. As the officers approach "on both sides of the car, shining their flashing lights through the window," the speaker recoils in terror, mindful of the PG police's record of manhandling black bodies, "choking mechanics, shooting construction workers, slamming suspects through the glass doors of shopping malls . . . they shot at moving cars, shot at the unarmed, shot through the backs of men . . . no police department fired its guns more than that of Prince George County."

PG police profess "a certain impatience with crime," but Mr. Coates knows them to be "privateers, gangsters, gunmen, plunderers operating under color of law." Terrified, he realizes: Stopping his car means stopping his body. They "could do with that body whatever they pleased, and should I live to explain what they had done with it, this complaint would mean nothing." Always they are exonerated, reinstated, sent into the streets to terrorize again.

The officers return his papers and wave him on. No explanation for the stop. Because of my own roots, Mr. Coates's terrified panic strikes me as straight out of Nazi Germany. As my country did then, so America today believes itself to be the noblest nation ever, "a lone champion standing between the white city of democracy and the terrorists, despots, barbarians who seek civilization's downfall." This nation, however, "quotes Martin Luther King, Jr., while giving the biggest guns to the strong."

In America, the author informs his son, "it is traditional to destroy the black body." It's a heritage of random friskings, detainings, beatings, humiliations, for which no one is held accountable, "the gashings of heads and brains as the body seeks to escape." Bodies of young men, of girls and grandmothers. He contends that this rape is "so regular as to be industrial."

The author details several brutal deaths. The most searing is that of Prince Jones, son of a medical doctor, graduate of Howard University, “good Christian, scion of the striving class, patron saint of the twice as good.” A PG County cop dressed as drug dealer tailed him through three counties as Prince drove to visit his fiancée, stopped and confronted the young man with his gun drawn and no badge, then shot him dead yards from her home as he panicked.

The rape of his people has also raped our planet, continues the author, from degrading the oceans to extracting coal to “the transmuting of oil into food.” All is plunder: “It was the cotton that passed through our chained hands that inaugurated . . . the noose around the neck of the earth.”

Beloved readers, I charge you to attend to the Prince factor on your own and work through this tormented account of a friend’s life and death. It threads through the narrative, a recurring nightmare. Viktor Frankl’s deathcamp anguish came to an end. Ta-Nehisi Coates’s does not.